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American Literature 1

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America: Sweet Land of Liberty?

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” This statement from the United States of America’s Declaration of Independence suggests that America is a land of freedom, as “all men are created equal.” Freedom, however, has not historically been available to everyone in America. Originally, it only applied to land-owning, white males, excluding women and non-whites. Some authors, such as Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley, show in their poetry how America has overlooked certain demographics, such as women and African Americans. Bradstreet and Wheatley take care to do this subtly, as they are representatives of their own restricted demographics and do not have the freedom to afford upsetting the powers that be. Others, such as William Cullen Bryant, romanticize America in their writings, glossing over any of its faults. Bryant attempted to reimagine America’s darker history of dealings with the Native Americans, but in his attempt to depict Native Americans sympathetically, he revealed his Anglo bigotry.

Women were one of the overlooked demographics in America, of which Anne Bradstreet is a representative. Bradstreet lived during the 1600s when the Puritans were immigrating to the New World, and she and her family came over to America with John Winthrop. Puritans originally started moving to America to escape Catholic persecution from King Charles I of England against Protestants. Winthrop, however, while seeking religious freedom, was most interested in setting up Christian businesses in America. To Winthrop, America was a financial

venture which was to be guided by his Puritan principles. Puritans were Calvinists who wanted to purify the church in England because it seemed too Catholic. Protestantism began in England simply because Henry VIII wanted a divorce which the Catholic church would not give him. When he created the Anglican church, he changed little in the liturgy, which resulted in Anglicanism being similar to Catholicism in form. Hence, the English church seemed too Catholic, and the Puritans sought reform either within or outside of England. Many of the Puritans who came to America were Separatists, separating from the Church of England. A defining trait of Calvinism, which the Puritans held to, is the belief in predestination, which is the theology that before the creation of the world, God had chosen who was to be saved and who was not. Traditionally, Christianity, especially in its more conservative forms such as Calvinism, is understood to be more limiting of women because of verses where it says women cannot teach or that they must submit to their husbands (1 Timothy 2:12, Ephesians 5:22). As immigrants to America were largely Puritans, the resultant society in America was strongly Puritan. Anne Bradstreet lived in a world where religion closely intertwined with society, which meant she was only assigned a domestic role and any skills she might have beyond that sphere, such as writing, were disregarded. The only appropriate duties for her would have been those of a wife and mother.

Since society assigned roles to women not necessarily requiring intellect, women were not usually educated. However, Anne Bradstreet was in a very unique position in which she was educated, unlike the other women of her day. Her father went out of his way to teach her, and he encouraged her writing (*Norton A* 207). Growing up, Bradstreet had access to the library of an estate her father managed, and she married a university graduate, with whom she likely carried intellectual conversations (207). Her writing shows familiarity with mythology, history, and

other literature, as is evidenced by her many allusions. Bradstreet's education enables her to write in a manner which cannot help but be respected, in spite of her womanhood, which would have been cause for others in her time to deprecate it.

Bradstreet, while writing poetry, did not intend to publish any of it. Her brother-in-law published *The Tenth Muse*, a volume of her poetry, without her knowledge (207). In her poem, "The Prologue," Bradstreet addresses the critique she imagined she would receive as a female writer. She writes that she is "obnoxious to each carping tongue / who says [her] hand a needle better fits" (25-26). Bradstreet was expected to stay at home and be a good housewife and mother. Women's tasks were domestic, and included sewing, which is where the needle reference comes in. Society would have Bradstreet use the needle, not the pen, because she was a woman. Writing was not a part of homemaking and belonged to the world of men. Bradstreet writes that others think that she would "wrong" the "poet's pen" because they "cast" "such despite" "on female wits" (27-28). Women were thought to not be intellectually equal to men, which meant they were inadequate for producing writing, including poetry. This thinking of the inferiority of "female wits" was so strong that Bradstreet anticipated that if she "[proved] well" and wrote good poetry, people would refuse to believe that she was a capable poet (28, 29). They would instead assume that her good work "is stol'n or else it was by chance" (30). Her readers would either accuse her of plagiarism or say that her poetry was by accident. She anticipated that no one would take her seriously as a good writer.

Being educated in a world where it was unacceptable for women to utilize their intellect outside the home grated with Bradstreet. She knew full well her place in the world and what the world thought of her as a woman, but she disagreed. Women were not supposed to write, but she did. If a woman did write, it was not supposed to be good, and she thought that at least some of

what she wrote qualified as good, since she anticipated a negative response to her good writing (29-30). In spite of being rebellious in her writing of poetry, Bradstreet did not want to push the limits which society restricted upon her too much. While she struggled with her faith, she remained a firm Puritan. Robert Richardson suggests that “Anne Bradstreet’s struggles between love of this world and reliance on the next, and the poetic expression of those struggles” is “an attempt to achieve the Puritan ideal of living in the world without being of it,” rather than simple rebelliousness (318). As she struggles with the world’s restrictions upon her as a female poet, Bradstreet strives for a subtle balance of rebellion and submission. In order to present her poetry as acceptable to the world, she does not even call it poetry, calling it “obscure lines” (6). For the first four stanzas of “The Prologue,” Bradstreet repeatedly insists that she cannot come anywhere near as great as “poets and historians,” “Bartas,” and Demosthenes (1-24). It is ironic, however, that while Bradstreet is deprecating her abilities in these stanzas, these stanzas are also the most packed with allusions, all of which would be subjects which women should not know. Bradstreet clearly *does* know them as she is referencing them and working them into her poem. This irony is Bradstreet’s subtle way of suggesting to her audience that she is just as smart as the men. In her conclusion, however, Bradstreet backs off a bit, saying “men can do best, and women know it well” (40). She says that all she wants is for others to “grant some acknowledgment” of women’s abilities (42). Being a Puritan herself, it is possible that Bradstreet genuinely believed that men could write better than women. However, considering the lengths she went to show her intellect in her allusions, as well as her anticipations of others’ critique, it seems likely that Bradstreet felt she had waxed too rebellious and needed to take a step back and placate her audience, telling them what they would want to hear, which would be that men write better than women.

The Puritans sought freedom from religious persecution in coming to the New World. Freedom continued to remain a strong theme in America in the shift from the early colonial period in the 1600s to the revolutionary period in the late 1700s. While early immigrants to America came seeking religious freedom, in the late 1700s America sought freedom from England. In spite of its residents seeking freedom, America was guilty of slavery. As early as 1619, slaves were being brought to America (Spears 1). The slave trade prospered and grew in America and was not brought to an end until the end of the Civil War, “more than three hundred years” later, with slavers finally being charged and punished for piracy (223). Arguments for slavery were religious, ideological, and practical. Surprisingly, “religion led the way” for supporting slavery, with arguments that slavery is not specifically condemned in the Bible and that Jewish patriarchs kept slaves (“Proslavery Argument”). At the core of slavery is the idea that blacks were somehow less civilized and human than whites. They were “viewed as inherently disruptive, imposing pagan ways and sexual license upon an otherwise orderly society,” so keeping them in slavery ensured that civilization was not disturbed by their supposed “evil ways” (“Proslavery”). Adding to the idea of blacks being less than whites, scientific arguments were made by ethnologists and physicians that blacks were physically different from whites, enough to suggest that they were not equal to whites. Slavery was also thought to be economically practical, being “both more efficient and more humane than free labor” (“Proslavery”). However, in the face of all these arguments, Phillis Wheatley suggests in her poetry that blacks are just as human as whites and that Christianity does not support racial superiority, and as she disagrees with the arguments for slavery, she is subtly seeking freedom for African Americans.

In her poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," Phillis Wheatley addresses how blacks have souls which can be saved just like their white counterparts. To do this, she tells her own story of salvation. A reader expects a poem titled "On Being Brought from Africa to America" to be about the trials of the voyage, the freedom lost, or the sufferings of slavery after arriving in America. However, in the very first line, Wheatley says "'Twas mercy" which "brought [her] from [her] pagan land" (1). "Mercy" brought Wheatley from Africa to America, not slavers or bad fortune (1). Wheatley parallels Joseph in the Old Testament, seeing ultimate good in evil. Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery, yet he rose in status from a slave in Egypt to being vizier, and as such was able to save many in a time of famine, including his family. While slavers intended a life of slavery for Wheatley in bringing her to America, Wheatley found "redemption" in Christ, which was an ironic good brought about by evil (4). After establishing her salvation in the first quatrain of the poem, Wheatley moves on to suggesting that all "Negroes, black as Cain, / May be refined, and join the angelic train" (7-8). If she can be saved, then other African Americans can be saved as well. This seems obvious to readers now, but the fact that she has to make this point implies that in Wheatley's day people did not believe it. Right after telling her salvation story, Wheatley says "Some view our sable race with scornful eye," and it seems implied that there are those who think that blacks cannot be saved, which would mean they do not think of them as fully human and having souls (6). Slaves were considered property, rather than people. There were many who thought blacks were a separate species than white and somehow subhuman. Wheatley is suggesting to her audience that they are wrong, providing her own example of salvation.

When Wheatley first wrote her poetry, her authorship was doubted, just as Bradstreet anticipated her own would have been. However, in Wheatley's case, her authorship was so

doubted that before she could publish her poetry she was summoned before a group of men who questioned and examined her to determine whether or not she truly wrote the poetry she claimed she wrote (Gates 5). The question on the line, however, was not so much whether or not Wheatley herself could write, but whether or not an African American was capable of producing “imaginative literature” (26). If Wheatley proved that she as an African American could write poetry, then African Americans would have to be understood “as members of the human family,” rather than just “a species subhuman” (26). Also following this reasoning, if “Africans were human beings,” then they “should be liberated from slavery” (26-27). If African Americans are equal to white people, then whites do not have the right to enslave them. Wheatley does pass her examination, and the men write not only that they believe she wrote her poetry, but also that ever since coming to America, she has been “under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave in a Family in this Town” (30). In accepting Wheatley’s scholarship, they must also see her eye to eye as a fellow human being, in which case being a slave is considered a “Disadvantage” (30). It is still only the 1700s, however, and the Civil War far from looming on the horizon. Wheatley is acknowledged as a poet and a person, but she seems to be considered an anomaly rather than a representation of her race.

In her poem, Wheatley addresses a Christian audience. She says, “Remember, Christians” that blacks may be saved just as whites can (7). Amongst the group questioning Wheatley’s authorship were “seven ordained ministers” (Gates 14). Of these pastors, all were “intensely interested in human rights,” and many “were in some way sympathetic with or outrightly involved in the Whig crusade for the abolition of slavery” (Levernier 24). Wheatley, living in “the center of revolutionary Boston,” no doubt heard many of these preachers and their messages of “freedom and human rights” (25). It is ironic that while America strived for

freedom from England, freedom for African Americans was nowhere on the radar. As someone without freedom, Wheatley is sympathetic to the Revolutionary cause, and when she suggests this is her poem to the Earl of Dartmouth, she also points out her own lack of freedom, which can be subtly noticed as not being resolved by America's freedom (23-31). The irony is stronger in that Wheatley is surrounded by Christianity on all sides. America was established by Christians, and it remained Christian through the 1700s. Furthermore, the rhetoric for America's freedom was rooted in the idea that God had created men equal, with certain rights. However, Christianity does not support the idea that race has anything to do with the soul. All humans are created in God's image and should be treated as such. That Wheatley needs to write a poem, addressed to Christians, about the existence of souls in African Americans is uncomfortably ironic. Christians should not "view [Wheatley's] sable race with scornful eye" because according to the Bible, "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for [people] are all one in Christ Jesus" (Wheatley 6, Galatians 3:28). Christians should be the last people to draw divisions and margins between people, yet the Christians in Wheatley's day needed to be told that blacks had souls just like white people.

Wheatley is often critiqued for not being terribly inventive in her writing. Marsha Watson states that "critics have refused to acknowledge her intertextuality, instead deeming her imitation of Anglo-European authors as imitative" (110). Watson's argument is that Wheatley's poetry is not merely copy-catting European poetry, but that she is interacting with European poetry as a "social action" (110). Imitating earlier works is a means of drawing connections between the past and present. I would like to suggest that perhaps Wheatley, like Bradstreet, felt the constriction of her times and the pressure to be careful in how she expressed her own feelings on freedom. Wheatley knew her audience to be of European background, so she used European

verse in speaking to them. It is interesting to note how Wheatley used European poetry to talk about American topics, such as slavery. Wheatley, when she addresses Christians, telling them that “Negroes, black as Cain, / May be refined and join the angelic train,” questions “the simplistic proslavery equations that set black skin equivalent to sin and bestiality” (Wheatley 7-8, Watson 123). Watson states that this is an “[open] [challenge];” however, while Wheatley is very clear in her message that race does not influence the soul, she only tells her audience to “remember” that blacks have souls (Watson 123, Wheatley 7). She is not telling her audience to “listen up” but to “remember,” which implies that they already know what she is telling them, so she is saying nothing new. If Wheatley is not saying anything shockingly new to her audience, then some pressure can be taken off of Wheatley if the audience does not like what they hear. She believes it, but it was not originally her idea. This allows her to write her poem in a manner that while clear, is not too bold or offensive to those who would disagree with Wheatley, which would have been many. In disagreeing with the idea that blacks were inferior and subhuman, Wheatley was disagreeing with the core argument of slavery, but as a slave in her time she could not very well denounce slavery openly. It was only the 1700s, and America was too busy fighting for freedom from England to worry about the freedom of anyone else just yet.

After America broke free from England, the development of American literature became of utmost importance in the United States. Authors in 1800s America were “convinced that a sign of a great nation was the existence of great national literature” (*Norton B* 5). As a result, the literature produced in this time period dealt with American subjects, such as the land itself. Many authors “placed a special emphasis on the importance of the natural landscape for the development of national character” (7). In describing the vastness of a given landscape, they were suggesting freedom and the realm of possibilities in America (Olson 15, 42-43).

Regarding the “character” of the United States, some writers did not shy away from being “critical” of imperfections in America (*Norton B* 7). During the 1800s, “Indian removal was becoming a national policy on the basis that, as many Americans believed, the day of the Indian was over” (7). Since the beginnings of Europeans’ dealings with Native Americans, the Indians were marginalized. They were expected to move aside as Europeans moved in and colonized their land, and in the 1800s white people were making policies to relocate the Indians elsewhere. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act to swap land on the east side of the Mississippi river with land on the west side (“Indian Removal,” “Indian Territory”). The west side was Indian territory, and the east was intended for whites. The Trail of Tears was the journey the Cherokees made to relocate, and “over 4,000 died from disease, hunger, and exposure” as they were removed from their land (“Trail of Tears”). Due to immigrant Caucasian policies, Native Americans were dying out. As authors were writing American literature, describing the land in America, the original inhabitants could not be ignored. Several works in this period addressed various responses to the disappearing Native Americans. Many authors took the Native American decline to be an example “that all mighty nations must fall” (*Norton B* 7). Others took belated concern on the Native Americans’ plight and suddenly posed the idea that Native Americans were not as “savage” as Caucasians had always thought, but that they were just like Europeans. These authors, lamenting the history in the making of Native Americans dying away, strived to rewrite history, recreating Indians into persons just as civilized as their European counterparts.

William Cullen Bryant was an author who romanticized America’s history with the Native Americans. In his poem, “The Prairies,” Bryant describes the American prairie, imagining its past inhabitants. He does not start with the current Native Americans who are

dying away, but with an even older people, the “mound-builders,” who “vanished” when “the red man came” (Bryant 60, 58). Starting with a long-dead civilization which had already given way to a newer civilization starts a trend in the poem. There was the civilization of the “mound-builders,” but they gave way to “the red man” (60, 58). If the trend of dying civilizations can be expected to continue, then it stands to reason that the follow up after “the red man” is the white man (58). Bryant is, in a sense, trying to come up with a good excuse for the white people’s takeover of America, pushing the Native Americans out. He tries to romanticize the dying out of the Native Americans by describing it as part of the natural order of life. Civilizations come and civilizations go, so there is nothing to be sorry about if one’s own race is supplanting another race.

Bryant also romanticized the disappearing Native Americans by painting them as a civilization, rather than just savage and tribal. Native Americans had long been considered “savages” and were understood by white people to be less cultured and civilized than Europeans. Bryant, however, goes to great lengths to depict the “mound-builders” as civilized. The “mound-builders” are a “disciplined” people, who live in “swarming cities” (60, 46, 65). They grew “harvests” and kept “herds” of “bison” as livestock (51-53). They also were “Sabbath worshippers” who sang “sweet and solemn [hymns]” (120, 119). Bryant is trying to recreate the Native American “savage” image into a civilized Native American image. However, Bryant’s only understanding of “civilized” is through the lens of Anglo culture, and he creates not a civilized Native American image, but a Europeanized Native American image. This image does not create a true picture of the Native Americans. The Native Americans did not live in “cities,” and bison was for hunting, not for livestock (65). Furthermore, if the “mound-builders” came even before the current Native Americans, then how could they possibly be “Sabbath

worshippers,” since they could not have heard about Christianity or Judaism yet? (120).

Romanticizing Native Americans to seem just like white people does not help racial relations. It would seem like showing that Native Americans are just like white people would help Caucasians to see the Native American’s humanity. However, the underlying assumption is that whites are the standard for humanity, which is an egocentric way of perceiving the world. In order to truly understand the Native Americans, Caucasians need to see them as they are and understand them on their own terms, rather than through Anglo terms. In his romanticizing of American history, Bryant hurt, rather than helped, the Native American cause.

Various demographics have been marginalized throughout American history, including women, African Americans, and Native Americans. Both Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley were constricted by society, and in their writing they had to find ways not to ruffle feathers and still say what needed to be said about their equality with white males. William Cullen Bryant, while perhaps meaning well in depicting Europeanized Native Americans, still perpetrates the idea that Caucasian is the standard to which all other races are compared. The prejudice against all who are not white males is a sad, ironic truth of the land of the free.

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